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A Dream Collection for Wealthy Utopians. [Review of *Modern British Utopias, 1700-1850*, ed. Gregory Claeys, Pickering & Chatto, 1997]

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Science Fiction Studies

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A Dream Collection for Wealthy Utopians.

Gregory Claeys, ed. *Modern British Utopias 1700-1850*. 8 vols. Pickering and Chatto (fax: +44-0-171-405-6216), 1997. 4128 pp. £550 (approx. \$880) cloth.

There is something disconcertingly ironic in the marketing of a multi-volume set of utopias that only the rich can afford—and especially when it comes from an academic publishing house whose logo features a laurel wreath encircling the words "Mundus Intellectualis." But, be that as it may, this very handsome set of British utopian works from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must be seen as a major publishing breakthrough. For the first time, to my knowledge, a wide variety of utopian and anti-utopian texts from this period—the famous, the infamous, and the virtually unknown—have been assembled into one series and made accessible to the (library-going) public. For the eighteenth-century literary scholar or historian, these tomes constitute a veritable treasure-trove of primary materials, including:

Annus Sophiae Jubilaeus. The Sophick Constitution: or, the Evil Customs of the World Reformed (1700)

[Ambrose Evans]. *The Adventures and Surprising Deliverances of James Dubourdieu* (1719)

[Ambrose Evans]. *The Adventures of Alexander Vendchurch* (1719)

Daniel Defoe. *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1720)

Simon Berrington. *The Memoirs of Sig. Gaudenzio di Lucca* (1737)

Pythagorlunister. *A Journey to the Moon* (?1740)

[John Kirkby]. *The Capacity and Extent of the Human Understanding* (1745)

[Robert Paltock]. *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751)

[Edmund Burke]. *A Vindication of Natural Society* (2nd ed., 1757)

The Voyages, Travels & Wonderful Discoveries of Capt. John Holmesby (1757)

Samuel Johnson. *Rasselas* (3rd. ed., 1760)

[Horace Walpole]. *An Account of the Giants Lately Discovered* (1766)

Private Letters from an American in England to His Friends in America (1769)

[Sarah Scott]. *Millenium Hall* (4th ed., 1778)

[John Elliott]. *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* (1778)

[Thomas Spence]. *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe* (1782)

[William Thomson]. *The Man in the Moon; or, Travels into the Lunar Regions* (1783)

A Journey Lately Performed Through the Air (1784)

The Modern Atlantis; or, the Devil in an Air Balloon (1784)

Aratus. *A Voyage to the Moon Strongly Recommended to All Lovers of Real Freedom* (1793)

Modern Gulliver's Travels (1796)

A.E. *Libellus; or, A Brief Sketch of the History of Gotham* (1798)

James Lawrence. *The Empire of the Nairs; or, the Rights of Women. A Utopian Romance* (1811)

The Last Man, or Omegarus (1806)

[Thomas Erskine]. *Armata. A Fragment* (1817)

[G.A. Ellis]. *New Britain* (1820)

[John Minter Morgan]. *The Revolt of the Bees* (3rd. ed., 1839)

Benjamin Disraeli. *The Voyage of Captain Popanilla* (1828)

The History of Bullanabee and Clinkataboo (1828)

[John Trotter]. *Travels to Phrenologasto* (1829)

Lemuel Gulliver [author unknown]. *Sequel to Gulliver's Travels* (1830)

Great Britain in 1841 (1831)

Lady Mary Fox. *Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland* (1837)

John Francis Bray. *A Voyage from Utopia* (1842)

Douglas Jerrold. *The Chronicles of Clovernook* (1846)

The Island of Liberty and Equality (1848)

Charles Rowcroft. *The Triumph of Woman. A Christmas Story* (1848)

Henry Forrest. *A Dream of Reform* (1848)

The series is edited by the well-known utopian scholar Gregory Claeys of the University of London. He offers a concise but necessarily cursory 27-page introduction covering how the genre evolved within the British socio-historic milieu of 1700-1850, and he includes many brief annotations throughout the pages of the works themselves. The final volume of the series also features a quite useful "Consolidated Index."

But one might justifiably wonder: what is the purpose of such a massive compendium? The editor's introduction, oddly enough, never addresses this fundamental question. When the collection first appeared in 1997, Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton observed:

Claeys reprints a few well-known (anti-) utopian pieces like Johnson's *Rasselas* and Burke's spoof *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), but most of his chosen texts are obscure, amateurish, and drearily written.... The 1840s, like the closing decades of the 18th century, were awash with utopias for obvious political reasons; but in common with the political journalism they covertly are, utopias are the most ephemeral of literary forms.... No form of fantasy could be more provincial and prosaic. By the end of the 19th century, after Morris's mighty classic [*News from Nowhere*], the task of

imagining otherness would pass to science fiction, which performed it with a good deal more panache. (*London Review of Books* [4 Sept. 1997]: 7)

So, apart from the publisher's obvious (and perhaps misguided) desire to strike gold in the institutional marketplace, what is the real *raison d'être* of an elaborate, multi-volumed collection such as *Modern British Utopias*? To the scholar of literary history, the answer is clear: its purpose is primarily archival—to save many of these texts from not-so-hallowed oblivion and to make them available for future researchers. The resurrection and preservation of such literary artifacts is not without scholarly importance. After all, how many of us have ever heard of John Minter Morgan's *The Revolt of the Bees*? — **ABE**